

*A TRIBUTE TO DON BAER*

MICHAEL F. CATALDO

KENNEDY KRIEGER INSTITUTE

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

Have you noticed that when something important is about to happen, leaders somehow appear?

A generation or so ago, something began to flicker in a segment of the behavioral science community, and a small group of its members began to pick up on the signals. A new scientific frontier was beginning to take shape. It would be based on an analysis of individual behavior, which had been pursued in many settings over many years, with variable precision, elegance, and power, and which had produced descriptive statements of mechanisms that control behavior. Up to this point, for the most part, behaviors were chosen because they were convenient to the study of underlying mechanisms. The time was now right, they argued, for the mechanisms gleaned from this analysis to be applied to behaviors of social importance. The “experimental analysis of behavior” was about to give rise to “applied behavior analysis.”

These signals about a promising new area to explore were described in a document that explicitly mapped the dimensions for this exploration. Aptly named “Some Current Dimensions of Applied Behavior Analysis,” it was strategically placed in the first issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*. The authors, Don Baer, Mont Wolf, and Todd Risley, were three of the “early explorers” who, over the next few decades, defined and developed the field of applied behavior analysis.

I had the great privilege to be one of Don’s graduate students. I could, therefore, comment on the contributions that Don made to my education, skills, and career, which were considerable.

But, as important as the many contributions Don made to me and over 150 of the other master’s and doctoral-level students he mentored, and to research in the field (described in over 200 papers, chapters, and books), and as endearing as the personal remembrances are at a time such as this, it is Don’s broader role in the critical early unfolding of the field of applied behavior analysis that I wish to emphasize here.

Would Don agree on this emphasis? I am not sure we are to know what Don himself would list as his greatest accomplishment. We can no longer ask him. But sometimes in looking at little things that a person elevates to a place of importance, we can get some insights.

His office at the department was utilitarian. But prominent by the lack of any other pronouncement as to what could be found within was the small sign on the front of the door to his office that read, “Word Merchant.” A merchant buys and sells things for a profit. When Don wrote, we all profited.

Don wrote about many things. Certainly he wrote about his research, as do many of us. But he also wrote about things not the subject of his research. He wrote on topics about which he had never written before, and often about which the rest of us had neither written nor read. Now very few of us do that. We do not, I suspect, because it is difficult and risky. He did so because we asked him to, and we asked him to time and again because Don had the enduring ability to update the dimensions of applied behavior analysis. He seemingly could take any topic, problem, or phenomenon, which at the time was “unexplored behavioral territory,” and show with logic, precision, and

eloquence how it might be defined, measured, analyzed, and thus ultimately understood. "Let's see if we can get Don Baer" was always the first suggestion when planning a meeting or conference, be the purpose to explore a new area, synthesize existing findings, or set funding priorities. He was our "go-to guy."

Exploration can be both rewarding and dangerous. Exploration offers the rewards of new discoveries at the risk of getting lost in the attempt. It is axiomatic, therefore, that the success, indeed the very survival, of explorers and the ability of others to follow their lead is dependent on the proper map or chart.

Considering the outcomes, I wonder how Don would have felt about a sign for his door that read, "Cartographer."

Words pave the paths on which ideas travel. Don's writings were elegant charts of the paths to be taken, as well as those that must be avoided. His prose could show the way for behavior analysts and non-behavior analysts alike. Knowledge of, and appreciation for, behavior analysis were not required. Indeed, as elegant as was Don's writing and as compelling as was his logic, in my opinion, he never really directly promoted behavior analysis. For Don, behavior analysis was a tool—one with considerable power and relevance to problems in society that he had helped forge and use throughout his career—but still a tool, which, along with other tools, could make the unknown knowable. Thus, whenever we asked, Don mapped paths for us to follow and did so in a manner that could convince those outside our field as to the value of the journey.

Don studied and taught about child development. His studies taught that development was an active endeavor that involved learning processes. He showed that among the learning processes of importance were *modeling*, so that imitation could be facili-

tated, and *generalization*, so that behavioral skills could be applied to new problems in different settings.

We are all tied together as part of ever expanding communities of mankind. This is no more apparent than when a member of a community dies. Don Baer fostered and helped guide the field of applied behavior analysis. He did so by modeling exemplary behaviors for others to imitate, and he provided so many exemplars that classes of behavior could be formed and (I hope) generalized by us to new problems in different settings.

Don Baer is the first of those responsible for the initial development of applied behavior analysis to leave us. His passing thus heralds, in a most dramatic way, that a new generation must now shoulder the responsibility for the continued development of the field that he and others began.

Of course, for years now, others (many of them Don's students) have taken over the tasks of investigating, teaching, writing, editing, and so on. But there is a vital distinction to be made between stewardship and leadership.

Is something important still about to happen? Will leaders still somehow appear? If there are still new exciting areas to explore, as there were a generation or so ago, will adventurous explorers be willing to take risks by venturing into uncharted territory?

Who will be our "go-to guy"?

Our cartographer?

Not only the creation but also the continued development and evolution of a field requires that some of its members venture off into new, unexplored areas; that they be willing to leave the comfort and safety of studies and lines of inquiry that vary only slightly what has been tried before. A field that seeks to continue to develop, to evolve, and to be dynamic, important, and relevant must signal that such exploration is necessary and will be highly reinforced.

This brief section of this issue is to be a tribute to Don Baer. It is in the journal dedicated to a scientific endeavor Don helped to define and develop. We here are left to benefit from the best of what Don modeled. Much like the children whose development

Don sought to understand, we are now the subjects of a continuing experiment. We are now on our own. It is up to us to continue the development of this field.

What *we do* will be Don's legacy and his enduring tribute.



Donald Merle Baer, 1931–2002. (photo taken 1989)